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## Academic Counselling and Students' Educational Attainment in Ghanaian Higher Education

Dr. Sylvia Kabumle Ocansey

Lecturer, Department of Guidance and Counselling,  
University of Cape Coast, Ghana, West Africa

### **Abstract:**

*This study explored the role counselling plays in stimulating effective studies among students in Ghanaian public universities. Studying at the higher education level is essentially learner-centered and therefore more challenging to students. Counselling is, thus, necessary to support students' efforts at their lofty educational endeavours. In-depth interviews and a focus group discussion were used to gather qualitative data from a purposively selected sample of thirteen counselled students. Through thematic analysis and the interpretive phenomenological approach, the researcher analysed data to generate meaningful study findings. Profound academic insight, fruitful study habits and sharper study skills were among the valuable benefits students realised from experiencing their institutional counselling services. Effective partnerships were subsequently recommended among stakeholders in education to promote future professional counselling services among higher education students in Ghana.*

**Keywords:** *Counselling, academic achievement, university education, student support services*

### **1. Introduction**

Education is key in developing the human resource of all nations. By fostering a strong sense of individuality and community association among various groups of people, schooling adds profound value to human life (Sefa Dei, 2005). Higher education training in particular promotes students' critical and analytic thinking skills for enhanced living. In Nigeria and Ghana, the economic and social rewards individual university graduates gain, from attaining higher education has immense rippling effects on national development (Jimoh, 2010; Addo, 2010). This sanctions the invaluable role higher education plays in endorsing worldwide individual and national development agenda, through higher education (Jimoh, 2010; Addo, 2010). Many African students for that matter, seek to maximize the benefits of higher education by simply opting for such education in the United Kingdom (Maringe & Carter, 2007). In Ghana, currently, the many transformation activities that has engulfed formal education since its inception in the early colonial days, fundamentally aimed at establishing a more productive and responsive system that offers practical skills and knowledge, to meet existing national labour market needs, for worthwhile national advancement (Ministry of Education, 2002; Adu-Agyem & Osei, 2012). The core mandate of many higher education institutions, including those in Ghana, has accordingly remained at ensuring significant knowledge and training skills, to equip the nation's youth with valuable skills, towards more worthwhile national projects. Many of such projects do not only raise individual's living standards, but they also facilitate the establishment of modern social amenities and valuable economic indicators for societal and therefore overall national advancement (Addo, 2010; Jimoh, 2010).

Successful higher education however, does not come on a silver-platter (Botha, Brand, Cilliers, Davidow, de Jager & Smith 2005). The factors that impede this lofty academic adventure are therefore many and varied, given the sophisticated nature of modern-day life and its associated contests. Lack of significant teaching and learning resources, increased mental health issues (Connell, Barkham, & Mellor-Clark, 2007; Andoh-Arthur, Asante & Osafo, 2015) and widespread socioeconomic concerns, sternly triumph over university students' retention rates in contemporary society (Astin, Berger, Bibo, Burkum, Cabrera, Crisp ... 2012; O'Keefe, 2013). According to O'Keefe (2013), over fifty percent of students in the United States of America never graduate from university for varied reasons. Similarly, in Australian universities, the yearly students' attrition rate is pegged at a high twenty to thirty percent (O'Keefe, 2013). Botha et al., (2005) correspondingly attribute the increasing student attrition rate to their poor academic attainment that confirms the view that poor study habit, inefficient time management, low study motivation and lack of useful learning resources comprise the key deterrents to university students' high academic attainment (Essuman, 2007; Ogbodo, 2010). Students' limited information technology skills, poor library use, wrong notes-taking and time management skills, among many others present various stress and anxiety levels that severely define the challenging higher education learning encounter (Ocansey & Gyimah, 2015; Kolog, Sutinen & Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2014). While various learner types adopt diverse learning styles to advance their academic goals (Kumar, Voralu, Pani, & Sethuraman, 2009; Carnwell, 2010), several environmental and institutional elements equally impact the entire higher education experience, to produce varied results among students (Modipane, 2011). Lack of appropriate skills, anxiety and adjustment concerns among first year university students, equally sanction the need for institutional support services to buttress students' efforts in higher education

institutions (Stallman, 2008; Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009; Modipane, 2011). New students' increased experiences with confusion, fear, anxiety and defenselessness, as a result of their novel educational settings and programmes necessitate early counselling support at university (Petersen et al., 2009). Astin et al., (2012) for this reason describe university studies as complex and profoundly perplexing. Yet Ghanaian university students' continued non-utilisation of institutional mental health and assistive service facilities has assumed problematic extents (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015), though more research continues to focus on students' personal and study factors, sidelining the academic benefits students derive from patronizing their institutional counselling services.

To date, the relevance of Guidance and counselling services in promoting students' academic attainment at various educational levels is unfathomable (Taylor & Buku, 2006; Essuman, 2007; Aidoo, 2011). Chireshe (2011) and Fox and Butler (2007) for instance underscore the assistive service's importance for young people in contemporary society. Aidoo (2011) also endorsed the essence of counselling and orientation as the most popular support activities in Ghanaian Colleges of Education. The current study, thus, sought to outline the various means by which counselling impacts students' academics. It further seeks to reveal some key benefits Ghanaian higher education students mobilise from experiencing their institutional counselling service facilities. It is the researcher's intention to suggest fruitful methods from the study findings, to counteract the identified academic barriers prevailing over Ghanaian university students' commendable performance on their various campuses.

## 2. Theoretical Framework of the Research

The research was underpinned by Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). This theory suggests that diverse students' efficacy-belief systems, often determine the amount of effort they expend in achieving their various academic goals. While high-efficacious students usually emerge victorious as a result of their favourable self-belief systems and resilient efforts in adapting to their respective higher education learning encounters, low self-efficacious ones simply achieve little, owing to their unenthusiastic efforts, as a result of their lack of confidence in their personal capabilities, to achieve worthwhile results from their varied acts (Mill, Pajares & Herron, 2007). The immense role motivation and persistent hard work play, regarding students' academics, cannot therefore be ruled out when considering strategies to improve students' study outcomes at university. Chowa, Masa, Ramos and Ansong (2015) for instance confirm the effects of self-efficacy-belief systems, on Ghanaian students' academic attainment. The construct's effect on students' personal characteristics, school commitment and study goals meaningfully determined their eventual educational performance (Chowa et al., 2015). The four main sources that people engage to establish their self-efficacy belief systems similarly speak volumes to institutional counsellors, regarding their assistive services among higher education students (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). Mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion and physiological reactions remarkably transform diverse students' efficacy belief systems that in turn predict their adopted strategies to augment university students' study outcomes (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013).

## 3. The Nature of Student Support Services

Support services comprise a wide range of institutional systems, programmes and activities. The facility simply expedites students' efforts to take full advantage of available educational opportunities and resources. Physical systems like libraries, science and computer laboratories, lecture theatres and halls of residence efficiently endorse students' studies on university campuses (Sulemana, Ngah & Majid, 2014). Libraries remarkably influence students' studies, though timetabling of students' private studies, coupled with consistent revision of lecture notes equally promote students' study outcomes (Jato, Ogunniyi & Olubiyo, 2014). At the Hong Kong Baptist University for instance, students' remarkable academic attainment was severely attributed to their efficient library use (Wong & Webb, 2011). This confirms the key role libraries play in promoting students' academic attainment.

Relevant institutional services, on the other hand, hinge on student advising or school-based counselling services that heavily rely on professional or faculty members to mentor students into responsible academic behaviour (Campbell & Nutt, 2009; Hamilton-Roberts, 2012; Suleman et al., 2014). The role a well-established rapport plays in promoting the counselling relationship, attracts tremendous service commitment from both parties (Chireshe, 2011). As a professional, the onus lies on the counsellor to establish a trustworthy relationship with student-clients to mentor them regarding their personal, social, academic or psychological difficulties (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). The benefits of consistent counseling services on students' college retention and attainment are deeply unfathomable (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson & Odes, 2009). Aside redressing the debilitating effects of stress, depression and other mental health issues on students' attitudes and study outcomes, counselling equally assists students regarding environmental mal-adjustment, poor study habits and low motivation for studies (Connell, Barkham & Mello-Clark, 2007; Ogbodo, 2010). Ugur (2015) and Aidoo (2011) likewise stress the social and relationship-based importance of academic counselling among students in Ghanaian higher education. Students' increased socio-personal concerns reflects varied effects on their studies and counselling services often come in to remedy the situation in many instances. In this research, I sought to achieve the following objectives: -

- To outline the benefits of academic counselling among public university students in Ghana; and
- To unearth the specific means by which counselling supports university students' studies in Ghana.

## 4. Research Questions

- How does counselling service promote students' studies in public universities in Ghana?
- What benefits do public university students derive from engaging their institutional academic counselling services in Ghana?

## 5. Method

In this study, I adopted the interpretive phenomenological multiple case study design, which is embedded in the qualitative research approach. The personal focus of this research necessitated my use of the mentioned design, given its suitability in generating detailed description and interpretation of the complex university academic counselling phenomenon, as experienced by various study participants (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen&Sneigrove, 2016). I therefore commenced field work by first seeking ethical clearance and then presenting letters of introduction to relevant national bodies and institutional gate-keepers for official permission to conduct the study. Participant selection at institution B was rather smooth, owing to the fruitful staff cooperation I encountered at the site. At institutions A and C however, sample selection proved quite challenging, when the center directors denied me access to their records for various reasons. I immediately modified my initial sampling strategy, to combine the convenience, snowball and purposive sampling techniques, to achieve my purpose. The process culminated in a final sample of thirteen counselled participants, whom I quickly briefed regarding the research purpose and nature of their expected roles, as study participants. I also assured them of confidentiality regarding their personal identities, provided research information as well as personal safety while on the study. As part of confidentiality requirements, I further assigned pseudonyms to my participants and subsequently offered them the opportunity to opt out of the research, should they so desire, without being penalized (Carcary, 2009). I also requested a written consent from each participant, prior to their field engagement, and kept those documents as proofs of their willful consent to be involved in the research. Participants' willful consent in research engagement has immense credibility effects on the study (Carcary, 2009). I also made conscious efforts to discuss and schedule convenient dates and times with study participants, prior to their research engagement (Calson (2010). This assured me of their availability for the sessions, while further endorsing their willful consent to participate in the research. At the end of each participant's second interview session, I again invited them to the upcoming focus group discussion, which I fruitfully accomplished in about 95 minutes. Each in-depth interview on the other hand spanned 30-45 minutes. With permission from each participant, I audio-recorded each field discourse to facilitate future data transcription and analysis (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). According to Onwuegbuzie et al., (2009), transcript-based data reduction and meaning-making is the most suitable for qualitative research. The authors attribute this fact to the method's proficiency in generating apt imageries regarding participants' hidden meanings about the understudied phenomenon. All my efforts regarding the above-mentioned research procedures on the other hand, were fundamentally aimed at achieving high research credibility (Calson, 2010). Credible research implies a careful use of authentic and trustworthy measures in accomplishing an inquiry (Calson, 2010). Overall, I completed fieldwork with a set of twenty-two fully accomplished in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. Ten participants had a pair of in-depth interviews each but two others only showed up for their first sessions. I engaged the thirteenth participant solely in the focus group encounter, in view of her rather late expression of interest in the research. In all, eight participants attended the focus group discussion.

## 6. Characteristics of Study Participants

The participants I engaged in this study comprised thirteen higher education students who have received counselling from their institutional service facilities. The participants consisted of eight females and five males. I selected these participants from three public universities, sited in three different towns in Ghana. Institution B was based in the Greater Accra national capital, while institutions A and C were conveniently sited in two breezy- coastal fishing towns in the Central region of Ghana. I purposively selected my study sample, as a result of their prior experiences with the university academic counselling service that served as the central focus of my research. I acknowledged that participants' earlier counselling experiences were most essential to their involvement and response to the study's outlined research questions.

In effect, all my research sites were located in the country's southern hemisphere. This conveniently aligned with my southern-based location that enabled me to hold closer and prolonged discourses with participants, to fulfill my study's phenomenological focus. At such proximity, I easily and more frequently encountered my study participants, who were likewise at liberty to express their hidden meanings regarding the university academic counselling service, due to the relaxed and familiar settings that I engaged in my data collection. Table 1 shows a summary of study participants' bio-data.

Institution	Participant's pseudonym	Participants' gender & age	Study program	Student type & level of study	Religious affiliation	Engaged research activity
The crab	Nhyira	F (21)	B. Ed M'gnt in Education	Direct (200)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Nelson	M (25)	B. Sc. Maths. in Bus. Edn.	Direct (400)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Kwame	M (22)	B.EdM'gnt in Education	Direct (100)	Christian	2 interviews
	Mawutoh	F (26)	B. Sc Psychology	Direct (400)	Christian	2 interviews
	Lady	F (22)	B. Ed M'gnt in Education	Direct (200)	Christian	FGD
The sheep	Esi	F (23)	B. Sc. Marketing	Direct (300)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Seerious	M (23)	B. Sc. Banking & Finance	Direct (200)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Pee	F (22)	B. Sc. Business Admin.	Direct (200)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Gordee	M (25)	B. Sc Accounting	Direct (300)	Christian	1 interview
	Kwesi	M (22)	B. Sc. Banking & Finance	Direct (200)	Christian	1 interview
The deer	Bigails	F (32)	Post Dip.in Guidance & Counselling	Matured (200)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Yaa	F (25)	B. Ed Social Studies	Direct (200)	Christian	2 interviews & FGD
	Baby	F (22)	B.Ed Special Education	Direct (200)	Christian	1 interview

Table 1: Participants' Personal Data

## 7. Instrumentation

As already mentioned, I gathered data in this study through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. I settled for both data sources due firstly to their alignment with the interpretative phenomenological study goal that sought to generate rich discussions regarding the university academic counselling facility (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) endorse the use of multiple data sources to reach data richness and depth. Hancock, Ockleford and Windridge (2009) also described the interview as the most appropriate method in unearthing participants' hidden views regarding a social phenomenon, which in this case was the university academic counselling service. This awareness led me to engage study participants in a number of intimate discourses, to delve deep into their thoughts regarding the understudied phenomenon, for meaningful findings. My efforts to reach meaningful research findings motivated my efficient triangulation of data gathered from both sources, to underline participants' exclusively expressed opinions regarding the counselling phenomenon.

## 8. Data Analysis Procedure

I combined thematic analysis with the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA), to fruitfully analyse gathered qualitative data in this study. Braun and Clarke (2014) assert that thematic analysis offers a useful toolkit for analyzing complex qualitative data, while Vaismoradi et al. (2016) stressed the method's meticulous efficiency in deriving evocative themes, to describe social phenomenon. In view of the method's ease in achieving reflexivity and data thoroughness, I used it to unearth the rich diversity in participants' uniquely expressed meanings regarding the university academic counselling service (Braun & Clarke, 2014). This insight about the mentioned data reduction methods assured me of achieving further benefits from the study's methodological rigour and paradoxical complexity that often-accompanied interpretative phenomenological research (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). I thus promptly took up the challenge to personally transcribe all audio-recorded field accounts and worked meticulously to achieve data holism and familiarity. Indeed, the global picture I gathered from my early encounters with participants' audio-recordings, remarkably eased my data transcription task. The initial overall image I realized from the audio-recordings for instance led me to promptly notice existing inconsistencies and data gaps in their field accounts that called for my immediate application of member-checking to conceal them. According to Calson (2010), member-checking ensures research credibility, by providing participants an opportunity to confirm or disprove earlier assertions they had made in the data. Once the transcriptions were done, I progressed with further transcript re-readings to identify recurrent themes from the data. I fruitfully accomplished this mission via a careful color-coding process. Next, I engaged theme clustering to integrate smaller earlier identified themes with matching ones to create a super-ordinate and clearer picture about participants' counselling service meanings. I ended the entire data analysis process with a table of summarized themes that resonated expressive responses to my earlier outlined research questions in this study (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). I discovered at the end of the entire data reduction procedure that the complex iterative theme derivation method generated several benefits to my particular research purpose, despite the challenging process I painstakingly underwent to derive practical research results, regarding the understudied phenomenon (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

## 9. Establishing Trustworthiness in the Study

In this study, I established research rigour in two ways. First, by targeting physically close research sites to facilitate my ability to hold frequent and prolonged intimate discourses with study participants. The key benefit I derived in using this strategy was that I was able to establish a relaxed, conversational and open-ended atmosphere that offered me incredible access to a comprehensive qualitative data, regarding the academic counselling phenomenon, as held by study participants. Second, my use of approved qualitative research methods, both during data collection and analysis, also aimed at achieving greater study credibility.

The emphasis I placed on providing in-depth participant briefing, confidentiality and safety assurance to participants while on the study, among other qualitative research requirements were also all aimed at achieving research credibility. Similarly, the meaningful data triangulation I adopted to derive worthwhile research findings from both data sources, in addition to the appropriateness of my applied data analysis processes, equally confirmed the credibility of this research. I for instance combined the interpretive phenomenological and thematic analysis approaches to ensure that appropriate findings emerged from the gathered data. Indeed, the appropriateness of the mentioned methods I used in this study, also reflected the actual reality regarding participants' meanings of the academic counselling service, rather than portraying the researcher's personal views.

## 10. Results

In the current study, the researcher explored the various means by which study participants used counselling services to improve their academic activities in Ghanaian public universities. In recent times when students' socio-personal concerns have seen tremendous increase, counsellors' open and consistent interaction with students has transformed counselling into a more useful academic resource for students. By exploring participants' personal accounts regarding their institutional counselling experiences, therefore, the study underscored myriad service advantages that appropriately responded to the outlined research questions. The following results emerged from the research.

### 10.1. Counseling Improves Students' Reading Habits and Study Skills

It was evident from participants' accounts that the counselling service improved students' reading and general study skills. Students' astute reading skills has tremendous favourable implication for their overall academic work at university. By encouraging participants to avoid studying in noisy environments, and use the library setting more, as a result of its conduciveness for studies, participants simply valued their counselling interactions on campus. The fact that students were discouraged from carrying distractors like mobile phones to their study settings was deeply appreciated by participants. The counsellors simply explained that receiving and making calls while studying has severe devastating effects on their academic work. The following accounts confirm the academic benefits Mawutoh and Lady gained from their counselling experiences:

*'he (counsellor) taught me how to study, the time to study, and even the materials to study...'* He for instance advised that:

*'if you know you will be distracted by music or people, you must avoid studying in your home or at your hostel. You must rather go to a silent place like the library to read. Initially I used to read on my bed, sometimes while playing music and people will be chatting near me yet I thought I was learning... The counsellor told me to stop all that.'* (interview text from 26-year-old Mawutoh).

*My counsellor also suggested that when studying, you don't just take the book and read it, but rather, you can study topic by topic and at the end of each topic, you can just close the book and try to write down some of the points you have learnt on that topic. Also, he suggested that I try to remember some of the points I studied in the chapter by setting my own ear questions and trying to answer them. After answering these questions, I should not stop there... but I should be revising my notes from time to time... In fact, he-he told me to try and read over your notes for 21 days before going for my quiz or examination...'* (interview text from 26-year-old Mawutoh).

*'... the counsellor frankly told me that we have somethings that we should not carry along with us to our study places because they only serve as distractors to our studies. Examples he mentioned were our mobile phones and radio. He explained that for some people, every minute they have to receive a call which distracts their studies so through the counselling he taught me all those things and it has really helped me.'* (interview text from Lady, at institution A).

It is clear from the above narratives that the research participants' use of quiet environments for studies enabled them to concentrate better on their study materials. Consistent reading of lecture notes, as stressed by the counsellor also enables participants to understand the topics they study better, rather than just committing them to memory. It was therefore, not surprising that 23-year-old Esi admitted at her interview in institution B that:

*'counselling helped me to study better ... because I'm now really doing well with my books and at my church now. So, I think counselling... helped me grow my academic and spiritual life.'*

Another aspect where counselling remarkably impacted students' studies was in relation to time management. As already established, studying at the higher education level is largely learner-centered, unlike the second cycle stage where consistent supervision is usually available. For that matter, counsellors encouraged participants to efficiently manage their study time by drawing personal timetables to profitably use their free time for worthwhile learning outcomes. Efficient time-planning, endorsed with abstinence from unnecessary social activities will be the best means to generate greater academic benefits to participants. The following excerpts also present 'Serious' and Nelson's counselling accounts regarding time-management skills.

*'...he said something like time management and ... how to manage my time. He also taught me how to let's say engage more in my group studies ...'* (text by 23-year-old male participants, Serious).

In Nelson's case, the counsellor at institution A boldly asked him: -

*'... to get rid of certain things to make me study better... In fact, I confessed to him that am someone who likes visiting friends, chatting with friends... and I also like watching television and football matches. He later told me that all these takes most of my study time so.... to be on the safest side, he told me to reduce the amount of time I spend with friends and also watching football....'*

### 10.2. Counselling Enhances Students' Academic Performance

Participants' accounts in the study also revealed that counselling favourably influenced participants' academic performance. From the data gathered, some participants testified that their academic performance improved drastically as a result of the counselling service they received. Participants boldly testified to the remarkable increase in academic performance, as a result of their reduced emotional and social concerns that were addressed at counselling sessions. In the following accounts for example, Mawutohand Kwesi confessed that their continuous assessment scores (quizzes, assignment, group work, etc.) as well as end of semester examination grades improved tremendously. Mawotuh for instance noted that: -

*'Yes. I've seen physical changes. Eer at first my-my highest mark is 16. 16 over 20. Mostly I got 12, 13, but this semester my least was 14 and the highest was 20 over 20. My least, this semester was 14... even that one it is only in one subject...'* (26-year-old Mawutoh's open confession at institution A).

At institution B, 22-year-old Kwesi similarly confessed that: -

*'Yes please, the time table he set for me, he made me study a lot. I have seen changes in my studies because of that. Even my mum saw that now a days I study too much. Anytime she sees me, I am sitting behind my books studying so during the IA, my interim assessment that is like class test for about 30 marks I was not suffering... I did well too. Yes, my first one, over 30, I had 22.'*

The above accounts confirm the importance of counselling services on students' academic performance. Counsellors' strategic instructions and consistent guidance regarding students' academic behaviours usually culminated in noticeable students' academic progress.

Moreover, counsellors' contributions towards participants' change of academic programmes equally reflected positive effects on their efforts. Especially for Kwame the counsellor's intervention in changing his study programme from B. Sc. Psychology to B.Ed. Management in Education, offered him greater self-confidence and a sharper academic focus in the following year of study. It is an undeniable fact that pursuing an academic programme of one's intrinsic interest is simply vital to the individual's increased academic attainment. The fact that Kwame's programme choice in this case was determined by two uncompromising factors, namely his interest and academic strengths, did not only endorse his programme choice, but also aligned with a meaningful career goal. The following view expressed by 26-year-old male participant; Nelson reflected some counsellor support regarding his change of academic programme.

*'You know, when you get to level 100 you might change your course and programmes, so in the course of doing that, you will see your counsellors on campus so that they will guide you into that'*

Twenty-two-year-old Kwame's report on the same issue was that: -

*'...the counsellor took me through the steps in order to help me change my programme. I did that because I had difficulties with my first programme'*.

Academic programme change is, however, usually tedious and stressful for both fresh and continuing students, especially when students are poorly informed about institutional procedures that leads to accomplishing such goals. Participants in this case felt deeply gratified in the sense that their counsellors' intervention rendered the process quite simple, straight-forward and stress-free. Participants could thus never take this kind gesture on the part of their counsellors for granted.

### 10.3. Counselling Fortifies Students' Academic Self-Confidence

From the data, the researcher discovered that participants equally built immense self-confidence in their academic abilities and potentials through their counselling encounters. It was deeply reassuring to hear participants recount their counsellors' efforts at motivating them to live up to their academic expectations. Subsequent to those experiences, many of them modified their initially low academic self-concepts with more optimistic ones. The participants further confessed mobilizing more confidence in their ability to graduate in good time, with exceptional grades from their programmes of study, after their counselling service experiences. The following narratives illustrate the positive impact counselling had on participants' confidence levels. Mawutoh for instance explained that: -

*'Because of this, the-the-the pressure that was on me, that oh I cannot make it, is all gone. I feels more confident now .... and in the long term, now that my academic results have changed, I think I can do my masters after this degree ...'* (interview response from 26-year-old female participant).

In another instance Kwesi also observed from institution B that: -

*'I went for counselling because I was scared ... all the lecturers were saying that they couldn't help me to upgrade my GPA... Then I was saying I am done, because it's like I have been sacked from the school and my parents' money has been wasted. But the counselling interaction I had gave me hope and confidence to pursue my programme'* (interview comment by 22-year-old male participant).

Kwame likewise confessed at institution C that: -

*'... my GPA was very low so they said I couldn't even register for the programme this semester .... I knew it was time for me to be sent home... I went for counselling and after the process I was revived and I felt all hope is not lost after all. I realised I could do it.'* (interview response by 22-year-old male participant).

The above narratives evidenced the confidence study participants gained in respect of their university education, as a result of their counselling encounters. It was obvious that participants' counselling service experiences had favourable effect on their academics and they could not just keep those pleasant observations to themselves.

#### 10.4. Counselling Improves Students' Social Lives

Not only did Counselling improve students' academics in the study, but by enabling participants to resolve their personal social problems, counselling indirectly placed students in a much better position to concentrate more on their studies. The relief participants gained from overcoming their social challenges simply ensured a meaningful balance between their social and academic lives that equally impacted their academic outcomes. As social beings, students deserve both worthwhile academic and social lives to reach a responsible future. To this end, they must adapt meaningfully to their academic and social environments, that further endorsed another counselling service benefit. In the study, Baby's relief from her disturbing family problems that initially hindered her academic concentration was worth mentioning. Yaa's emotional healing from her uncle's consistent sexual abuses were likewise deeply gratifying. Lady's counselling accounts that highlighted the rewarding service effects on her relations with her roommate could not also be shelved and Bigails also gained empowerment over her painful marriage issues. The following responses revealed some key social benefits participants reaped from encountering counselling in their various institutions. Speaking on her case, Bigails, the only 32-year-old female participant at institution C confessed that: -

*'Yes, ... one time I told my husband I think we should see a counselor. ... we didn't go through the normal counseling process, so I felt we missed some information. ... so, we needed some information to help us keep the home going .... Frankly, our marriage issues deeply affected my academic work ...'*

Baby was equally firm at institution C about the benefit she derived from counselling, regarding her disturbing family problem. Her exact words at that instance were: -

*'...mine was about a family problem ... it affected my academic concentration so much that it made it difficult for me to learn. It got me thinking so much, I couldn't concentrate on anything.'*

But in the end, she confirmed the usefulness of her sessions in the following comment: -

*'...Because the counsellor took me as her daughter and told me to speak freely and without fear, so I was relieved from my earlier burdens...'*

From institution A, 22-year-old Lady, a female participant, similarly described her counselling experience as worthwhile in the following open confession she made: -

*'... yes, it helped me... especially in my relationship with others. At first, I used to fight with my roommate and so wouldn't attend group discussions... I later discovered that our quarrels often left me disturbed and unable to concentrate on my studies.'*

The above submissions simply documented the grave rewards participants gained from their counselling experiences. The specific benefits elicited from participants included: improved reading and study skills, enhanced academic performance, improved self-confidence and a better social life. Figure 1 presents a diagrammatic view of the students' counselling service benefits that were revealed by the study.

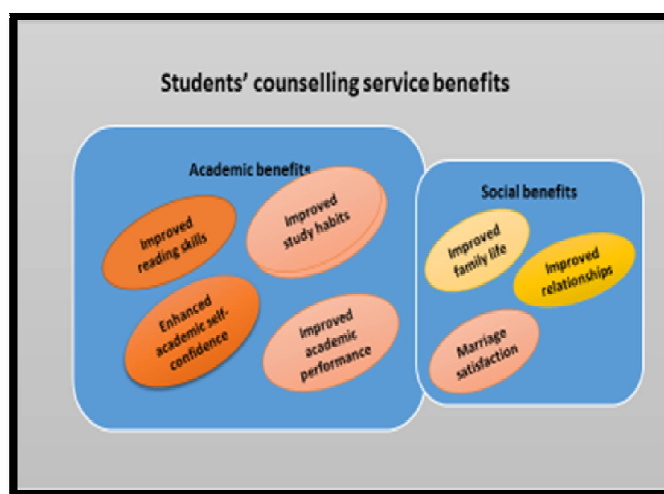


Figure 1: Students' Counselling Service Benefits

## 11. Discussion

In line with the study's interpretive phenomenological focus, coupled with the self-efficacy theory that underpinned the research, participants' identified service benefits largely informed the study. Aside responding meaningfully to the study's major research questions, the study equally unearthed explicit students' counselling service

benefits that go to endorse the services' usefulness to higher education students in contemporary society. The rewards participants made from this inquiry were essentially two-fold - academic and social. In the academic sense, participants constructed worthwhile study habits, sharper reading skills and also built profound self-confidence in their studies, as a result of their counselling experiences. Sharper reading and study skills have direct immense impact on students' academic outcomes (Bastug, 2014) and the more favourable effects of such skills on students' educational efforts, the greater their incentives on students towards further studies. This reflects Bandura's mastery experience that represents a key source by which individuals develop fruitful efficacy belief systems (Bandura, 1986). While sharp reading skills favourably impact students' academic performance, students' reading attitudes represents a more powerful factor in predicting their study outcomes (Bastug, 2014). Successful higher education students additionally attract responsible academic skills like consistent library use, efficient notes-taking skills, early and consistent revision of lecture notes, while consciously avoiding unnecessary study distractors. Efficient library use implies taking advantage of the conducive learning atmosphere for deeper concentration and therefore better comprehension of studied material. Using the library equally implies avoiding unnecessary distractors like fruitless friendly chats, disturbing radio and television programmes, and a more profitable use of one's precious time for greater academic gains. The above endorse Ogbodo's (2010) advice for students '*to form good study habits*' (p. 229) while drawing from important institutional resources like efficient lighting, writing desks, notebooks and lecture theatres for worthwhile academic purposes (Sulemana et al., 2014). Equally important is the need for students to use personal time tables to meaningfully distribute their study time among their various courses of study (Essuman, 2007; Ogbodo, 2010). Ogbodo (2010) further describes students' use of personal timetables in their private studies as so '*important as knowing what to study and how to go about studying*' (p. 229). In effect, not only do both high and low self-efficacious students learn worthwhile strategies to improve their studies from counselling, but the self-insight they gained regarding their individual strengths and capabilities equally motivated them to readily cooperate with their counsellors for their greater individual academic gains.

On the social front, participants' family, marriage and relationship problems simply reflected tremendous impact on their academics. Poor concentration, excessive worrying, low study motivation and deep frustration usually prevailed over disturbed students' attitudes, and therefore usually derailed their academics. The mental health challenges often associated with such challenging students' situations never offers them any respite until they seek appropriate help (Andoh-Arthur, Asante & Osafo, 2015). Andoh-Arthur et al, (2015) thus endorse students' need for counselling and mental health assistance on various higher education institutions. In the study, counsellors' meaningful social and emotional encouragement, consistent student mentorship and trustworthy interactions with student-clients for that matter, yielded enormous returns on their overall lives. It was indeed so reassuring to hear study participants openly declare the relief counselling brought them. The service's social and relationship effects simply strengthened their self-confidence in their academic pursuits. In effect, not only did students' identified service benefits in the study sanction their need for early counselling intervention at university, but it equally stressed the consistency element in providing assistive support, to promote students' overall life. It was thus envisaged from the research that the above-mentioned service benefits will eventually improve students' poor academic performance to enhance their future graduation rates at university.

## 12. Conclusion

Compelling evidence exists regarding the numerous academic counselling benefits among higher education students today. Indeed, the proliferation of service facilities on various institutional campuses confirms the numerous service benefits documented in the literature. It is undeniable that students' need for responsible study habits and skills is essential to their persistence in the ever-challenging higher education learning encounter. This underscores the importance of early and consistent professional counsellor interaction on the various institutional settings for students' overall gain. Counselling thus remains a huge asset to all students in contemporary society.

## 13. Recommendation

The researcher recommends that officials of the National Accreditation Board for Tertiary Education liaises with service officials at the Ghana Education Service, to enhance professional service delivery by posting trained counsellors to institutions nationwide. It is also advised that practicing counsellors in the various institutions seek consistent self-advancement by partnering with other national and international colleagues, via conference and in-service training attendance, in order to remain abreast with novel changes in the profession. Moreover, the researcher recommends a collaborative effort among Counselling Associations countrywide to implement innovative and creative service activities, given the remarkable benefits of such efforts on service recipients. Again, aside establishing an educational policy on personal timetable use in all Ghanaian institutions, school administrators and teachers should equally encourage students to adopt the strategy more in order to promote their private studies. Finally, it is recommended that early and consistent counselling services should also be adopted as an education policy in all Ghanaian institutions to reduce students' hindrances to their fruitful academic performance.

## 14. Limitations of the study

The few fieldwork hindrances I encountered in this inquiry may have somehow affected the overall research findings. The higher number of female participants I derived, as opposed to my initial intent to maintain a gender gender-balanced sample, in addition to the limited number of eight participants I engaged in the focus group session, may have affected my final study findings. The limitation occurred as a result of the change I adopted in the initial participant sampling strategy, when the counselling center directors in two of the studied institutions denied me access to their



records to achieve my purpose. In the case of the limited number of participants at the focus group, the researcher was so appreciative of the contributions of the few who participated in the activity. It will be advisable that a more practical sampling strategy is adopted in the nearest future to engender fairer research findings.

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